

Wildlife Woes

Wildlife began purchasing land long before buying open space was accepted and before there were any flood plain and wetland restrictions against filling, draining, and developing marshlands. In its early years, it was often at odds with growing municipalities that viewed Wildlife as an impediment to progress and economic growth. Some municipalities charged Wildlife Preserves excessive property taxes and some foreclosed on its property to gain ownership. Municipalities also used zoning to render Wildlife property useless, while federal and state governments created regulations that diminish its fiscal value without compensation. Also battling Wildlife are gun clubs, hunting organizations, and New Jersey Fish and Game (now NJ Fish and Wildlife) because Wildlife prohibits hunting, trapping and fishing and chooses to restrict its land as a safe haven for animals.

Throughout its 60-year history, Wildlife Preserves has invested hundreds of thousands of private funds to purchase land for preservation and pay property taxes - for more than 20 years - until the State created and Wildlife enrolled in the Green Acres Tax Exempt program. Wildlife Preserves has spent millions-upon-millions of dollars in legal fees and administration costs to manage and protect its land - all through private philanthropy - without cost to taxpayers, or government grants or contributions. Yet some government officials continue to oppose Wildlife Preserves despite the fact that its preservation efforts have provided the general public with open space and recreational opportunities and billions of dollars in flood protection, at no cost to the public.

For years the State of New Jersey promised - through letters and contracts - to acquire Troy Meadows as a natural area and wildlife sanctuary, but as administrations change, the state has only acquired a small fraction of the meadows and neglects the acquisition of the greater portion of Troy Meadows owned by Wildlife Preserves. Wildlife preserves' land holdings are often illustrated as Green Acres Projects and noted as "preserved land" making it appear as if Wildlife Preserves is public property.

During the '80s, the New Jersey Freshwater Wetlands Protection Act was enacted and imposes rules and regulations to protect wetlands and land adjoining wetlands. At the same time it renders the market value of wetlands and meadows nearly fiscally worthless. As one state official allegedly bragged, "We no longer have to spend money to buy meadows because now we control them through regulations."

Then came the New Jersey Highlands Act. It strengthened restrictions on wetlands and also imposed restrictions on natural, vacant uplands. And even though Wildlife is not interested in developing land, when government regulators restrict and remove development potentials, market values plummet and a landowner's ability to interest government in acquiring and permanently protecting land is hindered and its ability to recover the cost of holding land is also lost.

All these regulatory acts have basically allowed government to inversely condemn much of Wildlife's land without paying for it. And in several instances, utilities and governments have actually taken advantage of regulations that devalue land and through the years hundreds of acres of Wildlife's property have been seized through eminent domain.

In Troy Meadows, against Wildlife's objections, its land was taken and used for Interstate Route 80, Interstate Route 280, the Route 80/280 Interchange, the Route 280 service road, the Route 280/New Road entrance and exit ramps, the Texas Eastern and Algonquin gas transmission pipelines, the Parsippany-Troy Hills sewerage pipelines and pump station, Parsippany-Troy Hills water wells, etc.

It is a hardship for unfunded organizations that spend so much time, effort, and money acquiring and maintaining land when the powers that be can zone and regulate it and take it when they want it. There are many success stories in Wildlife Preserves' history of preserving and protecting land and wildlife, but not without much adversity and cost.